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SUBJECT: WOMEN IN POLITICS: THE ROAD IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION

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Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The road to political empowerment of Turkish women continues to be under construction. While women have equal political rights and freedoms, the right to vote, and the right to be elected and to engage in political activity, the number of female Members of Parliament (MPs) and women in local governments is still low. Turkish women often stay clear of political careers because of domestic responsibilities and societal pressures to avoid being active in public life. In addition, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) projects its ideal vision of women as educated but non-working pious housewives. This view does not support women's active participation in politics. The government's initiatives for women seem tailored for the EU reforms display cabinet -- but not for the actual halls of power. End Summary.

"Traditions" and Working Women in Turkey  
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¶2. (C) Prominent MPs and women's organizations representing a range of political viewpoints told us that the traditional Turkish view of women as the sole caregiver of the family limits the ability of well-educated women to pursue a career. The majority of women who actively participate in politics generally do so later in life -- after first finishing their higher education, raising their children, retiring from their primary careers, and finally earning a greater social status due to their age. Nationalist Action Party (MHP) Deputy Chairwoman Senol Bal also noted that government employees are not allowed to be members of any political parties. Therefore, as a former academic, she had to wait until after retiring from her position at a government university before she became engaged in politics.

¶3. (C) According to Prof. Ayse Ayata of the Middle East Technical University Political Science Department, highly educated women in Turkey compose approximately 25 percent of the female population. (Note: Prof. Ayata conducts extensive studies in Gender and Ethnicity and Political Parties and Women in Politics. End note.) Ayata stressed that the second, and most important, segment is the middle 50 percent of the female population who have some education but who are largely economically dependent on their husbands or their families.

¶4. (C) Ayata told poloff that in order for women to gain status and become more visible in public, government, and society, they have to operate within the social restrictions which are imposed verbally and non-verbally in their environment. Ayata complained that within the current Islamist-oriented and socially conservative AKP Government, women are increasingly expected to cover their heads and stay at home in order to be considered "proper." The AKP ministers set a similar example for their constituent group. Among the current AKP ministers, only two, Egemen Bagis and

Ahmet Davutoglu, have wives with independent careers. Of the 24 married ministers, 20 of their wives wear a headscarf. Only two AKP Ministers are female. (Note: Neither wears a headscarf. End Note)

15. (C) Ayata explained that during the last seven years of AKP governance, the number of women university graduates who work in the government has dropped from 86 percent to 68 percent, despite what she characterized as the female applicants' strong educational backgrounds. According to Ayata, the reason for the drop is the "preferential treatment" during the hiring process of the AKP government toward men in general and men from a Muslim religious background in particular. She also stated that the AKP is focused more on increasing employment of males because it believes men should be the primary income-generator for the family. She noted that the bottom 25 percent of women does not have adequate access to educational opportunities and constitutes an entirely different problem.

#### Women in Politics in Turkey

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16. (C) All contacts with whom we spoke, both women and men, unequivocally agreed that there are higher educational requirements for women in Parliament than for men. In addition to bearing the main responsibility for domestic chores at home, women are expected to have additional education degrees, language skills, and work experience in order to be accepted in the male-dominated Parliament. Currently there are only 50 women MPs in the 550 seat Parliament (9.1 percent). Among the total population of MPs,

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the AKP has 340 MPs, with 30 women (8.8 percent). MHP has 71 MPs, with two women (2.8 percent). The Republican Peoples Party (CHP) has 112 MPs, with 10 women (8.9 percent, contrary to CHP's own 20 percent female participation quota rule in their party by-laws). In a sharp contrast to the general picture, the Democratic Society Party (DTP) has 21 MPs, with 8 women (38 percent) -- a share in line with the DTP's 40 percent quota rule.

17. (C) Among these MPs, the only female ministers are the minister for Women and Family Issues, Selma Kavaf, and the Minister of Education, Nimet Cubukcu. According to Ilknur Ustun, President of Organization for Supporting Women's Candidacy (KADER), and Prof. Ayse Sencar of the Ankara University Department of Political Sciences, AKP's female MPs have publicly adopted PM Erdogan's political views on all issues rather than expressing their own opinions freely. (Comment: This seems an unfair criticism since party discipline places the constraints on male MPs as well. End Comment) These MPs believe, Ustun said, that just as PM Erdogan provided them with their opportunity in politics, he could push them aside as well.

18. (C) PM Erdogan supports the AKP's Women Auxiliary Organization (WAO), not least due to its importance in collecting votes during elections. Fatma Sahin, the head of AKP WAO, told us it currently has over a million members, most of whom work as volunteers for the organization. Sahin also told us that although the WAO ranks include women without headscarves, the majority of the members are housewives and wear headscarves. Sahin explained that these volunteers, because they wear a headscarf and work only with women, experience little resistance from their families. In return, they ensure their husbands' job stability in the party and gain prominence for themselves and their families in AKP-oriented businesses.

19. (C) However, despite the WAO's large membership base and importance during elections, the number of women who have climbed up the organization to higher positions is very low. Democrat Party (DP) Deputy Chairwoman Selma Acuner contends that many of the female MPs in the parliament are hand-picked

by PM Erdogan due to their family ties, background, and connections and that almost none of them were members of the AKP's WAO. (Comment: As a rival party official, Acuner would be unlikely to hold a flattering view of the AKP internal process. End Comment) Few female MPs are assigned to higher positions. None has responsibility in areas such as economics or politics. (Note: Although headscarf-wearing women cannot legally sit in the National Parliament, there are no such obstacles on the local and provincial levels. However, even at that level, few women participate. End Note)

#### Equal Opportunity Commission: More Talk Less Work

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¶10. (C) Erten Aydin, a professor at Cankaya University who is closely aligned to the AKP, told us that PM Erdogan is aware of the equal opportunity problems for women in politics and the possible impact on Turkey's European Union accession process. This may be the reason, she said, why the Commission on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men was established in Parliament in December 2008. The Commission reviews draft laws, follows and informs parliament about international developments on gender equality issues, and responds to individual complaints of citizens by informing the necessary governmental institutions. According to Acuner, the Commission is currently working on bills concerning child abuse and domestic violence issues. The head of the Commission, AKP Chairwoman Guldal Aksit, and MHP Deputy Chairwoman Senol Bal (a Commission member) stated that the Commission is new but intends to focus on equal opportunity issues in more detail in the upcoming months. She conceded, however, that the Commission has not met more than twice yet due to the MPs' busy schedules. According to Sencar, for many years secular and Islamic-oriented women's organizations worked together on equal opportunity goals. However, she said, these combined efforts are starting to diminish because of the limited results.

¶11. (C) Aydin reminded us that prior to the municipal elections in March 2009, PM Erdogan told the media that the government needs to conduct "positive discrimination" in favor of women in the preparation of the nomination list. However, Aydin said, attempts to implement Erdogan's policy were discouraged by male members of the AKP, who complained that the limited number of positions should go to men. Perhaps as a result of these complaints, Erdogan did not proactively seek female candidates, and the number of women elected to municipal political bodies was a very low 0.5 percent (REFTEL).

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#### Comment

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¶12. (C) AKP's secularist critics are, naturally, discontent about the full range of AKP policies. Still, it seems indisputable that in Turkey the road that takes women to influential positions in politics is getting narrower. Women face higher expectations for education, disproportionate societal pressures to maintain the home, and reduced access to political appointments or jobs leading to active participation in politics. Although the AKP contends it is elevating women's status in the family, it appears disinterested in strengthening the role of women in government and politics. One significant side effect has been to reduce the collaboration between women activist groups who wear headscarves and those who do not. These groups used to work closely together.

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